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THE CAUSES OF WAR

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A SUPERFICIAL consideration of the many wars of the past might lead one to think that the causes of war are as numerous as the wars themselves. There are interesting accounts of wars having been occasioned by trivial causes. A dispute over a pig is said to have threatened war at one time between the United States and Great Britain; at another time, between France and the then republic of Texas.¹ The war of 1738 between England and Spain, which later became a part of the great war of the Austrian Succession, is known in history as "Jenkin's Ear War," the actual occasion being the maltreatment by the Spaniards of an old English sea captain, resulting in the loss of an ear.²

If we distinguish, however, between cause and occasion, we find that, while the occasions of war are many and varied, the causes are few. This fact has been pointed out by Lecky with respect to the wars of Europe. He says:

If, indeed, we examine only the proximate causes of European wars, they present the aspect of a perfect chaos, and the immense majority might be ascribed to isolated causes or to passing ebullitions of national jealousy. But if we examine more closely, we find that a deep-seated aversion produced by general causes had preceded and prepared the explosion. The great majority of wars during the last 1,000 years may be classified under three heads—wars produced by opposition of religious belief, wars resulting from erroneous economical notions, either concerning the balance of trade or the material advantages of conquest, and wars resulting from the collision of the two hostile doctrines of the divine right of kings and the rights of nations."³

Thus, according to Lecky, the causes of the wars of Europe may be reduced to three categories, namely: religious, economic and political. If, as the exponents of the doctrine of the economic interpretation of history maintain, both religious and political beliefs have an economic basis, these three sets of causes may be reduced to one, the economic. But whether history is to be thus explained or not, it is safe to say that the principal cause of the wars of Europe has been economic.

In the wars of primitive times the economic cause stands out conspicuously. Men lived in tribal groups; they were unacquainted with efficient modes of production; they were averse to labor. Savage tribes,

¹ See Macy, A. W., "Curious Bits of History," p. 160, and Wooten, Dudley G., "A Comprehensive History of Texas," Vol. 1, page 370.

² Cheyney, Edward T., "Short History of England," page 557.

³ Rationalism in Europe, Vol. II., pp. 219-20.

rapidly expanding, naturally experienced increasing difficulty in obtaining a food supply. This led to nomadic habits or to migration. Roving bands, pastoral or hunting, in search of food, came into collision. The result was war, followed in primitive times by cannibalism, later by general exploitation and slavery. Says Robinson:

Among tribes subsisting on the products furnished spontaneously by nature war is the normal condition. The reason is, in the main, economic. The scarcity and precariousness of the food supply render much land necessary to support each family. Unless climatic conditions absolutely prevent an increase of population, the hunting grounds of the several tribes are of necessity extended until they overlap; and so arises a war of extermination, whose issue is the destruction of the least efficient social organization and the restoration of the equilibrium between population and the food supply.⁴

The tribal wars of the American Indians may be taken as an illustration. The Algonquin and Iroquois tribes met and fought in the fine hunting grounds of the Mohawk valley; the Shawnees, Delawares, and Miamis, in Kentucky, "the dark and bloody ground."

So also the economic cause is plainly visible in the early wars of history, whether they took place in Europe or in Asia. In the earlier civilizations there was periodically a swarming of the hive, as one might say, great migrations, *Völkerwanderungen*, which necessarily meant contact with other civilizations and the resulting contest for food, wealth and the other material things that men most desire. The very nature of these early wars is indicative of the fact that they were due primarily to an economic cause.

The same thing is true, although less conspicuously so, of the later wars of history. It was so of the early wars of Greece and Rome, of the wars of feudal times, of the series of contests between the various maritime powers, of the wars of the Palatinate, of the war of the Spanish Succession, and of the American Revolution. Even the so-called religious wars are reduceable to an economic basis—the crusades, for example. Says Molinari:

Lorsque l'expérience eut démontré que les croisades ne payaient pas on y renonça et les guerres d'expansion des peuples de l'Europe ne recommencèrent qu'après la découverte de l'Amerique.⁵

The wars of Napoleon, and many of those since his overthrow, as, for instance, the Crimean war, the Chinese wars, the Mexican war and our own great Rebellion, have been largely if not chiefly due to economic questions, either with respect to the acquisition of trade or of trade routes. The same may be said of the present war in Europe. If we penetrate beneath the superficial phenomena—the assassination of a crown prince, mobilization of armies, royal ambitions, national jealousies

⁴ *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. XV., No. 4 (Dec., 1900), p. 582.

⁵ "Grandeur et decadence de la guerre," p. 49. Quoted by Robertson in the article cited.

and race prejudices—we find commercial rivalries, desires for an outlet to the sea, or “a place in the sun.”

Wars in general, then, arise chiefly from economic conditions. In early times the principal motive was either conquest and the advantages arising therefrom or the securing or maintenance of some special economic advantage. Since the development of a money economy, and the consequent national interdependence, the possibilities of economic exploitation through conquest have gradually diminished, so that the idea that war is economically profitable to any of the countries concerned may well be regarded to-day as “The Great Illusion.” Still, economic friction between the trading nations of the world is a patent fact, and it is to-day, as it has been in the past, the principal cause of international strife.

Other causes, of course, have occasionally risen into prominence, particularly the ambition of rulers; the desire of governing classes to aggrandize or protect themselves; national bumptiousness and aggressiveness, due chiefly to an ignorant and blind patriotism; and, as a minor cause, differences in philosophic tenets with respect to government. And so also the sentiment of nationality, considerations of national honor, the preservation of the wellsprings of national morality, which most people seem to think gush forth only in their own country; the attainment or the preservation of “the peace of righteousness”—which means, I suppose, the peace resulting from the victory of “our side” in a contest—all these, even if they have not occasioned war, have been paraded among the reasons that are marshalled by those who would justify war or even glorify it. But, after all is said, the fact remains that the causes of war have been and are to-day chiefly economic.

This being the case, it will be interesting now, and necessary to the general purpose of this discussion, to turn our attention to the nature of an economic cause.

The idea of cause is inseparable from the idea of force. Some kind of force is indeed the only efficient cause, whether it be in the physical, vital or social world. Now the forces which produce social results are the feelings. Feeling is the dynamic element in human society. Social conflicts, of which war is an example, can arise only from a conflict of feeling between the groups involved. If this conflict is due to a clash of economic interests we have, in the initiation of such conflict, the operation and manifestation of an economic cause. An economic cause, then, is mutual hostility of feeling arising from the competition of industrial groups of different classes or nations. To say, then, that the chief cause of war is economic is but to say that wars are due in general to industrial competition as carried on between the nations of the world.

But the industrial régime of the world has always been, and is now,

competitive. Nations are in constant competition for markets, for trade routes, for opportunities for expansion, or, more accurately, the trading classes of nations are in such competition. Some gain, others lose. Naturally, hostile feelings are evoked, government is appealed to, international disputes arise, and, becoming acute, wars are declared and are waged to promote the economic interests of the dominant industrial classes. The chief conditions that incite war, then, are inherent in our present system of industry. Indeed, the business of the world as carried on to-day is war, only it is veiled by certain conventions, too often by pretense and hypocrisy, and is transacted in general under the sanction of law. When the pressure becomes too strong upon the feelings, that is, when the conventional and peaceful means are insufficient to obtain the end sought, there is resort to arms. Armed warfare is only a phase of the general industrial warfare that prevails the world over.

Some deny this fact. They persuade themselves, or are persuaded by the biased arguments of those interested in maintaining things as they are, that the interests of the various industrial and commercial classes and nations are the same. But this is not the case. As Robinson well says, in the article already quoted,

The dogma of the natural and necessary harmony of the interests of all nations is just as false as that of their natural and necessary antagonism. This dogma is true only so long as each nation has a natural monopoly in some one line of industry,—as the free traders erroneously assumed that England had in manufacturing. While competition is absent, commerce is, indeed, a bond of peace and good will between those who buy and those who sell in return. But the moment that two nations embark extensively in the same line of industry, that moment commerce becomes a sword, dividing and setting at enmity those who are rivals for the same markets. For of them it is true, as Montaigne declared, that no profit can be made except to the damage of another. The increase of one is the decrease of the other; the prosperity of one is the other's destruction. Such nations stand to each other as two Indian tribes when there is but game enough for one.⁶

Now the bearing of all this upon the immediate or early cessation of war is obvious. Wars are not likely to cease so long as the fundamental cause is operative, that is to say, so long as economic conditions and relationships remain as they are now. These conditions and relationships will continue to evoke strife, and, under the stress of passion, swords will be drawn no matter how unprofitable from a business standpoint war may be. This is not to assert that human weakness is the cause of war. It is the weight pressing upon the beam, not the weakness of the material, that causes the fracture. So war is due, not primarily to human weakness, but to the economic conditions in which this weakness is unable to bear the strain. There is no hope of permanent peace without a change in the conditions which make strife inevitable.

⁶ Article cited.

The fact that commerce and business in general do in some respects make for peace has led many to suppose that the spread of commerce is fatal to the existence of war. Professor Shaler, writing in 1896, said:

So long as the control of governments was in the uneconomic classes of men who had nothing to lose and much to gain by war, the influences were overwhelming for its continuance; now that the business people are gaining control of the world's affairs there is reason to hope that the cure is about to come to this ancient and enduring ill.⁷

But this hope is vain, as recent events have shown. So long as the economic interests of classes and nations are antagonistic there will be war. No demonstrations of its waste, no sentimental appeals for peace, will prevent it. Not the spread of commerce but the harmonization of economic interests is the most effective remedy.

The application of this remedy is conceivable, however impossible such application may be at the present time. A cause of war arising from economic conditions is not ineradicable. War is not due to anything inherent in nature or in man—not to hunger and the law of decreasing returns, as Robinson concludes. He says:

The cause of war is as permanent as hunger itself; since both spring from the same source, the law of decreasing returns. So long as that persists, war must remain, in the last analysis, a national business undertaking, designed to procure or preserve foreign markets; that is, the means of continued growth and prosperity. *Chacun doit grandir ou mourir.*⁸

But hunger and the law of decreasing returns might conceivably lead, and ought to lead, to cooperative effort to produce food, rather than to war, which is an organized and systematic effort to secure it by robbery, and in which much of it is unprofitably consumed and destroyed. Might it not have been said in the earlier swashbuckler days, and with equal truth, or error, that "the cause of piracy and robbery is as permanent as hunger itself"; and yet "lifting" the goods of another, as a means of "growth and prosperity," has in general given way to other and more approved methods of gaining a livelihood. May it not be also that in time an improved industrial economy will provide a sufficient amount of material goods to maintain an intelligently restricted population? With the enormous possibilities of industry, intelligently organized and intelligently directed, the expectation that the maintenance of a nation's civilization by work rather than by war may at last be realized, and thus the economic cause of war be removed at all events, this expectation should not be regarded as an altogether empty and iridescent dream.

But granting the present impossibility of eliminating the economic cause of war by a revolutionary change in economic conditions, there remains the hope that through the dissemination of knowledge respecting the waste and futility of war as a mode of social action, and as a means of achieving social results, at least the frequency of war may be

⁷ Shaler, N. S., *North American Review*, Vol. 162, page 340.

⁸ Article cited.

lessened. Popular education, however, it must be admitted, has not fulfilled the early expectations with respect to its promotion of peace. It has indeed lamentably failed; for the results of increased popular intelligence and the advancement of science are manifested in the greater destructiveness of war, and apparently in its more savage brutality. The failure, however, ought not to be charged to education itself, but to the kind of education that has prevailed and to the dissemination of erroneous ideas concerning the nature and results of war—the ideas of Treitschke and Bernhardi, false conceptions of national honor and patriotism, and the pernicious idea that the best way to prevent war is constantly to think about it and prepare for it, an idea contradicted by all we know of human psychology with respect to the relation of thought to action. Education properly conceived as the distribution of scientific knowledge and the development of the social spirit would in time eliminate war and all the other remediable evils that afflict mankind. It is the sole panacea. But as a means of preventing war it needs to be reformed. And to begin with there should be scientific instruction with respect to the nature of war, rather than the inculcation of false ideas which tend to promote it.

The true nature of war, unlike its causes, is not obscure. It is plainly revealed by a knowledge of biological and social evolution. Such knowledge ought to lead to recognition of the distinction between the blind social evolution of nature, effected partly by war, and a possible ordered social evolution achieved by human foresight. But the study of evolution, the one study capable of rendering this great service, has been discouraged, sometimes forbidden, in our schools and colleges, on the ground of its being unorthodox or atheistic; hence the superstition of nature worship which prevails to-day. There is indeed a natural evolution of nations and societies. As Spencer says:

It is true that much social evolution is achieved without any intention on the part of citizens to achieve it, and even without the consciousness that they are achieving it.⁹

But such evolution is uncertain, slow, wasteful and to no end save the adjustment of the social organism to its environment. It does not result in the survival of the best, but the fittest, and sometimes the fittest is ethically the worst. Its chief method is competition or war, both being essentially the same. This method, like all the methods of nature, is direct; it is the method of the brute. Says Professor Ward:

War, however much the indirect method may be incidentally employed in its detailed management, is in its *ensemble* essentially a measure of direct coercion. The effects are no greater than the effort required to secure them. The action is exactly balanced by the reaction. The algebraic sum of the results of all wars is *nil*.¹⁰

⁹ Spencer Herbert, "Various Fragments," page 132.

¹⁰ Ward, L. F., "Glimpses of the Cosmos," III., 41.

It is the function of intelligence to supplant the direct method of evolution as manifested by war by the indirect method of foresight and control. Man is man only in proportion as he controls natural phenomena and supplants the method of nature by the method of mind.

The world ought not to await the complete work of education, however, before putting an end to war. Only a preponderance of intelligent opinion with respect to war is necessary, and the effective expression of this opinion through an organization that will restrain the rashly belligerent nation from running amuck. In other words, the world must organize to prevent war, by soft words if possible, but by the use of the "big stick" if necessary. Intelligent and law-abiding men did not wait for the conversion of all duelists to abolish dueling. When they felt the power to abolish it they did so. Said St. Louis, King of France:

We forbid, to all persons throughout our dominions, the trial by battle . . . and instead of battles we establish proofs by witnesses . . . and these battles we abolish in our dominions forever.¹¹

So the peace movement should be directed toward the formation of a league strong enough to forbid war and that would establish, instead of war, "proofs by witnesses." War is not only an evil, it is a nuisance, and the nation inclined to belligerency should be confronted by the notice, posted by the intelligent and law-abiding people of the world, "Commit no nuisance, under penalty of the law!"

¹¹ Guizot, "Histoire de la Civilization en France," LeCon 14, Vol. IV., pp. 162-4.